Selling Wildlife Preserve Becomes Lion-Sized Chore

The American Broadcasting Corporation's Scenic and Wildlife Attractions, Inc., is trying to find buyers for the financially troubled Wildlife Preserve in Largo, Md.

The 280-acre animal preserve in Prince Georges county announced it would close in February and, since then, has been contacting other amusement park developers and operators in an attempt to locate an interested developer for the land, which was zoned for theme park use last October.

William H. Natter, Jr., director of the now-defunct preserve, who said ABC may lose up to $7 million, refused to comment when queried about names of prospective buyers for the property, but did say, "Develop a theme park list of major operators in the country, and you have got it.

"There has been great interest in the property, however," he commented.

"We were very disappointed with the performance of the park. It did not have a broad enough appeal to be a real success.

"We needed a theme park, but that required more money for development. The people in ABC thought that the money would be better spent inside the corporation, so we had to close."

The Wildlife Preserve announced last October, before the theme park zoning change, that the preserve would not open in 1976 with wildlife as the feature attraction.

They had hoped to change to a theme park, but this announcement was made before the decision to scrap the idea was handed down by ABC executives.

A theme park is an amusement park built around a central theme. For example, Busch Gardens, close to Williamsburg, has a theme of the "old country" with small hamlets depicting different areas of Europe.

The preserve in Largo has two main objectives for the future. The first is to try to recoup the estimated $7 million loss incurred in the project.

The initial ABC investment in the preserve was $17 million. But, Mr. Natter thinks the company will get $10 million back for the sale of the 280-acre tract of land in Prince Georges county, near the Capital Beltway.

Mr. Natter said he hopes to regain part of the $7 million difference between investment and estimated land value through the sale of the animals, equipment and other assets.

He said most of the 350 animals have already been sold to municipal zoos, animal dealers and other wildlife preserves.

"Fortunately, the animals are bringing the current market value. However, lions are hard to sell. There just isn't a market for them. Their price ranges from gratis to $300," he said.

"We are phasing the entire operation out and hope to have everything finished here by July 1."